

JESUS IS

HILLSONG CHURCH IS A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH, BUILDING ITS CONGREGATION OF PRETTY YOUNG THINGS WITH SOCIAL MEDIA AND CLEVER PROGRAMMING. BY MICKEY STANLEY

†TRENDING



PHOTOGRAPHED BY BETH GARRABRANT

THE VIBE AT THIS OPENING NIGHT IS SOMEWHERE BETWEEN ELECTRIC DAISY CARNIVAL AND A BILLY GRAHAM REVIVAL MEETING.

CARL LENTZ,
LEAD PASTOR
AT HILLSONG NYC



PHOTOGRAPHED BY ISA WIPFLI.

An astronaut dangles 15 feet above the crowd while the guy next to me keeps whisper-shouting, "Praise Jeeeesusssss." The audience of 5,600 bristles with excitement as gospel messages strobe across three huge screens onstage. It's Thursday, October 16, and this is the opening act of No Other Name, a sold-out, three-day spiritual conference in New York City. Hillsong, the wildly popular, Australian-born evangelical megachurch is hosting the event. Hillsong began with a small gathering of 45 Christians outside Sydney in the early '80s, and is now a Pentecostal behemoth of about 200,000, with 11 other campuses in London, Moscow, Paris, Barcelona, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Konstanz (Germany), Cape Town, New York, and Los Angeles. Conferences like No Other Name are the brainchild of Hillsong founder Brian Houston and his wife, Bobbie, both of whom are in New York tonight to get us amped on the Lord.

At first glance, many of Hillsong's youth-focused initiatives appear to involve enlisting proselytes to a cult of cool and a good time more so than to a church in the service of God. The New York branch's first group baptism took place in the rooftop pool at the swinging Gansevoort Hotel in the Meatpacking District, and another is scheduled for Times Square at the Grace, a trendy boutique hotel where the pool glows under pink neon lights. Celebrities are always more than welcome at Hillsong. For instance, Justin Bieber was recently snapped by paparazzi attending Sunday services in New York with friends Kendall Jenner and Hailey Baldwin.

According to a recent Pew Research survey, 20 percent of Americans say they have shared their religious





THE NEW YORK BRANCH'S FIRST GROUP BAPTISM TOOK PLACE IN THE ROOFTOP POOL AT THE SWINGING GANSEVOORT HOTEL IN THE MEATPACKING DISTRICT.

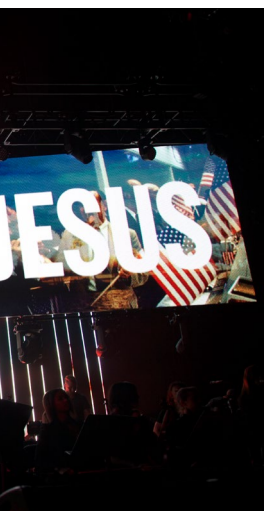
faith on social networking websites or apps in the past week, and 46 percent say they've seen someone else share "something about their religious faith" online. It's not surprising then, with 261,000 followers on Instagram, 557,000 on Twitter, and 847,000 on Facebook, that Hillsong turns to the Internet for promotion, and with great success. On their website, they have an article titled "Six Tips to Improve Your Social Media." They would know. Just a quick look around this crowd tonight, which is full of models, actors, and musicians, begins to explain why Hillsong has become such a magnet for bright young wannabes.

Hillsong, a church drenched in original pop music, is a family operation. Brian and Bobbie are the senior pastors. Bobbie champions women's issues through Hillsong Sisterhood and Colour Conference, her personal initiatives. Their elder son, Joel, a handsome, NBA-sized evangelist, is the lead singer for Hillsong United, the creative director of Hillsong Church, and the co-pastor of

the church in New York. Hillsong Los Angeles, which opened this year, is headed by Brian and Bobbie's younger son, Benjamin, and his wife, Lucille.

Once the astronaut exits, the serious worship begins, backed by pleasant, echoey gospel songs, all written and performed by Hillsong Worship, one of the church's bands. Music is the glue that binds this congregation and makes it so popular with millennials. Hillsong Music Australia (H.M.A.), the parent label responsible for the production and distribution of the church's catalog of recorded material, released its first album, *Spirit and Truth*, in 1988, and since then has sold more than 16 million units worldwide, netting about \$100 million every year. In 2015, Warner Bros. will release a documentary on the Hillsong music craze. "You go to a Hillsong in Kiev or Cape Town or London, and there's always the same energy, because one thing that Hillsong has done really well is its music," says Kelly Bollmann, a music producer who works with Timbaland, and attends services at Hillsong Los Angeles.

By 8:15 p.m., the preaching has peaked, and the audience, with their hands waving up to the sky like a field of wheat in a soft wind, is singing along. Before the final electric guitar riff fades, Brian Houston comes onstage to welcome the congregation. A show of hands indicates that more than three-quarters of them are out-of-towners. He also announces that the buckets being passed around are for tithing—as much as we can give. (This is in addition to the ticket price for the conference: \$154.)



The evening is capped by Brian's 45-minute sermon. He wears simple black jeans and a navy blazer, and at one point he projects a viral photograph he "found on Google" of a dachshund staring down a lion, to illustrate strength in the face of adversity. "Ignore the facts and stand on truth," he declares in his strong, deep voice.

The church was founded under the name Hills Christian Life Centre, in 1983, but was renamed Hillsong in the late '90s, when Brian Houston merged his congregation with his father Frank's parish, Sydney Christian Life Centre. The new, two-headed church managed steady growth and good community relations right up to 2000, when it became known that Frank had sexually abused a boy in New Zealand 30 years earlier. Once Brian forced Frank out, he began to untether the church from its fundamentalist roots, and to strip away the exclusionary aspects that might prevent fresh young faces from joining up. Hillsong has been growing exponentially ever since.

With Brian's sermon and some remarks by Bobbie, Day 1 is a wrap. If you missed it, don't worry. The church has started live-streaming their conferences through their app.

DAY 2: IT'S FOR US AND BY US

By 10 a.m., all of the seats in the huge auditorium are filled. After a few brief remarks by Brian, the lights dim, and the music picks up. No Other Name is showcasing three of Hillsong's in-house bands. Hillsong Worship, a folksy, stripped-down, mostly acoustic rock group, comes out first, and the audience is on their feet immediately.

Bethany Brill, a 28-year-old hair and makeup artist, who freelances for *NYLON*, tells me why she joined the Hillsong congregation in New York. "My church in Brooklyn was more older families, so I think I was attracted to the amount of young, single people that looked and acted like me and were in creative industries," she says. "People walking around Hillsong look like anybody I might see on a photo shoot. I was like, 'OK, these are people like me.' We probably think more alike or understand the little lane of life that we're in, so I could imagine that we'd understand God more in the same way, too." Another glance around the conference auditorium, and I see a large contingent of the young men and women Bethany is describing. They are having a blast.

At first, Hillsong grew by word of mouth in New York, but subsequently social media and sophisticated promotional efforts raised its profile significantly. It remains, however, a very friendly environment to meet people and enjoy hook-filled tunes. By the middle of Day 2 of No Other Name, the appeal of Hillsong is clear to me. The evening program, "Night Rally," for example, is designed

to display young congregants' talents in various creative fields, especially those who are hoping to secure unpaid volunteer positions within the organization.

Hillsong is essentially built on the backs of creative young people eager to offer free labor and show off their skills, from editing video footage to writing and performing worship songs to ushering people to their seats at conferences like this one.

DAY 3: THE STARS COME OUT

Saturday seems to come too soon, and it is crowded with gospel highlights. During the afternoon session, Judah Smith, a charismatic 36-year-old preacher from Seattle (where he leads his own youth-focused church) gets up and for nearly an hour blends comedic anecdotes with soulful messages. When Smith finishes, a South African comedy duo urges audience members to sing their national anthems in an *American Idol*-style contest. To an outsider like me, this feels flat and awkward, but the crowd's laughter is deep and genuine, demonstrating just how happy they all are to be here.

Hillsong United and Hillsong Young & Free, the other two in-house bands, are set to perform today. United are an indie-rock outfit fronted by Joel Houston. Their song "Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)" made it to No. 83 on the *Billboard* Hot 100 in 2014, and they're the crowd's clear favorite. Each of the three bands targets a special age range. United are for folks like me, in their mid-twenties/early thirties. Young & Free, on the other hand, deliver a cotton-candy blitzkrieg—lots of confetti and those inflatable used-car-lot dancing men. They are the dazzling finale of the three-day program.

Carl Lentz, the hipster preacher who leads the New York branch of Hillsong with Joel Houston, gives the final sermon. Lentz, who is 35, is routinely compared to Billy Graham. Where Graham used TV to reach his audience, Lentz has graduated to social media. He has 159,000 followers on Instagram and 109,000 on Twitter. His social-media presence is an effective marketing tool for the church. On Instagram, for instance, Kevin Durant, NBA All-Star and reigning league MVP, who was baptized by Lentz, playfully tosses the preacher's son in the air, and Bieber can be seen pointing at the camera during a pickup basketball game. In online photographs of Lentz, he is typically wearing a leather motorcycle jacket or a black streetwear outfit, and he often poses with his wife, Laura, and their children.

Most evangelical churches are located in rural, politically conservative, and culturally homogenous areas in America, but Hillsong settles in the dense, urban areas of New York and Los Angeles. "This church is a place that's built on faithful, normal people who are kind of out of their depth," Lentz tells me later. "There's only so much you can do in church. Some churches have drama, acting, whatever, and we give them that a little bit in conference, but music is a core element of how we worship."

In the summer of 1957, Billy Graham led a 16-week crusade inside Madison Square Garden, during which he preached to nearly two million people. Carl Lentz's appearance at No Other Name is just as ambitious.





He wants to draw more and more people to regular Sunday services at the Manhattan Center's Grand Ballroom, and he specifically aims to expand his congregation to include almost everyone. "Laura and I are leading this church, and we have diverse relationships, so naturally our church would have that. We don't hang out with all white people, so why in the world would we go to a church that is relevant only to white people? That's one of the advantages, I guess, of being in a church that champions people, regardless of race or creed or upbringing. Hopefully our church will always be super diverse. That's something that's intentional as much as it is cultural."

Hillsong may still be reluctant to face other current social issues, however. At a press conference the day before No Other Name began, for example, Lentz and Brian Houston responded to allegations that the church is against



gay marriage. Houston's dodge was to say that the subject was "too important for us to reduce to yes or no." Later he cited Scripture to enforce his "traditional" view on the matter, saying, "I believe the writings of Paul are clear on this subject."

Hillsong, now 31 years old, is obviously still young. In fact, it is in the advantageous position of being roughly the same age as its congregation. Brian Houston may be 60 years old, but his kids aren't. So far, the programming for Hillsong has evolved with trends in this country's youth culture. Maybe that's why it seems so hip and relevant, and why it keeps growing. Then again, something more calculated and self-serving may be a source for the church's success. As Lentz puts it, "In that moment when you clearly see God's grace, it can make you look way better than you are."